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Hilmi, A. and Burbi, S.

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TITLE: Peasant Farming, A Refuge in Times of Crisis

AUTHORS: Angela HILMI[1]*, Sara BURBI[1]

AFFILIATION:
[1] Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR), Coventry University Ryton Gardens, Wolston Lane, Ryton-on-Dunsmore, CV8 3LG, United Kingdom

* Corresponding Author: Angela Hilmi, angela.hilmi@coventry.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article considers a phenomenon seldom analyzed: The return to the roots, to family and friends, to the home village, when hardship hits. It looks into the role of peasant farming as a refuge, for those whose livelihoods have deteriorated, usually due to economic and financial crises for which they have no responsibility and even less say. Listening to the testimonies of those who go back to the countryside, or those returning to the sea (with examples in Greece, Spain, Portugal and Iceland), one hears a mix of struggle and hope, loneliness and fear, success and fulfilment. A destiny not always chosen, an imposed tabula rasa. These movements usually go unnoticed, but some governments provide the means to facilitate them, understanding the potential they hold for the country's wealth. A few examples are chosen here to inspire policymakers and provide insights into how to revive national economies, particularly in times of financial and economic hardship. These examples also lead us to reconsider our perspectives on the gap between the rural and the urban, and invite us to see what we may consider as a continuum of mutually reinforcing synergies.

Keywords: Peasant; Farming; Refuge; Urban; Rural; Crisis; Policy; Land

Introduction

Following the 2008 financial and economic crises, we witnessed in many countries in Europe a return to the land and the sea. For those who 'came back', this return was both an opportunity and a challenge and the transition was not easy. In this article, we look at two countries, Greece and Portugal, and briefly touch upon Spain and Iceland, to look at some of the emergent stories, and understand how the adaptation to new environments can be facilitated by conducive policies. Finally, and based on lessons learnt, we offer some reflections on the interface between the town and the countryside and suggest it offers potential worth further exploring.

In Times of Crises, People Return to the Land and the Sea

There is an ongoing movement, silent, continuous, and often unnoticed, that is unfolding before our eyes. It is taking place in many countries, and is most visible in the countries that were hardest hit by the 2008 financial and economic crises. Similar transitions happened in the past, in other contexts, in times of change such as, for example countries in Eastern Europe (e.g. Hungary, Romania etc.) following the end of the cold war.

We have chosen here to focus on Greece and Portugal, countries for which we could find some recent facts and to extend the analysis to two other countries facing similar circumstances—Iceland and Spain. Given the recentness of events and the data in the literature limited, a decision was to mainly base this review on information readily available in the press and other media. This explains the more journalistic style of this article, with people telling their 'stories'. This with a view to analyzing what happens, not only on the ground, but also in the minds of those directly concerned, to understand what triggered these movements and their societal implications. Another line of enquiry is also to analyze whether the new experiences and perspectives the 'returnees' came with, contributed to transforming the local reality.

We start with a brief overall snapshot of each one of these four countries which is particularly relevant in that it illustrates that when all goes wrong, the only indicators that show growth are those of the agricultural sector and the smallholder/peasant sub-sector in particular. These snapshots are followed by some more detailed and concrete examples of real life experiences drawn from Greece and Portugal.

When Other Sectors Go Red… The Agricultural Sector Continues to Show Positive Indicators

Greece: Amid the dramatic financial and social collapse that was witnessed—with sweeping public sector pay and pension cuts, massive job losses and with 35 percent of youth unemployed, vast tax increases, galloping inflation and the deepest recession in Europe—the Pan-Hellenic Confederation of Agricultural Associations revealed that the farming sector had grown by 32,000 jobs between 2008 and 2010 (Stolarz 2012).

Iceland: A few days after the assets of Icelandic banks reached 100 billion Euros, or ten times the country's gross domestic product and collapsed spectacularly, the banking system

had to be nationalized. This credit collapse demolished a once-booming economy. In an address to the nation, Iceland's Prime Minister declared: 'The fairy tale of banking is over. It is time to fall back on the resources of land and sea'.

Spain: In the midst of the forced evictions that followed the burst of the construction bubble, with Madrid's main square Puerta del Sol occupied by hundreds of thousands of Indignados (the outraged), the COAG (the Coordination of Organisations of Farmers and Ranchers) announced a 79 percent increase in the number of people, asking for training in agriculture (Vera 2013).

Portugal: With the country having had to resort to bailouts worth 78 billion Euros from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism (EFSM) and the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) (Almeida 2013) in order to refinance its debt and avoid insolvency, it is worth noting that in 2012, the country's Secretary of State for Agriculture had remarked of 'an economic reversal, a back to the land movement, fueled by the youth'. The number of farming jobs rose by 10.6 percent, the biggest increase out of all sectors of the economy (Statistics Portugal 2012).

In each of these countries we see that the agriculture sector is the least affected by the crisis and, in some cases has grown. The land plays the role of buffer (Hilmi and Burbi 2016) and refuge. How does this happen? Are the returnees' expectations fulfilled? How does this relate to peasant farming? Can we speak of a rebound of peasant farming? To further explore some of these questions we have a closer look at some of these countries.

Greece, When the Way Back Becomes a Creative Way Forward

In Greece, a nation-wide survey of 1,300 people, conducted by Kapa Research in 2012, showed that 68 percent of the people interviewed moved back to the countryside in search of a cheaper and a better quality of life (Babington and Papadimas 2012). The move to rural life offered a promise of rent-free housing, backyard produce, and support from the network of families and friends. Often it was a reversal of the journey the returnees' parents and grandparents had made in the 1960s and the 1970s. Here are some of their stories:

Spiridula Lakka (Babington and Papadimas 2012), a trained graphic designer left the city thirteen years before and she is now back in her village growing herbs and vegetables. Her experience has been far from idyllic. The arrival of young urbanites is observed with a mix of pity and envy by those who never left. *'There is no privacy. You feel like everyone is judging and trying to control you, and there is gossip,'* she says. *'It's a closed society'*. In the same village, Stefanou Vaggelis, a 50-year-old distillery owner comments: *'Those who have returned are desperate, adjusting to the life in the village is not easy'.*

Alexandra Tricha (Williams and Dineen 2012), a former scientist, started her own company raising gourmet snails. In the beginning everyone thought she was mad. Now her business is booming. *'You feel connected, you feel that you have roots here, that's one of the good things'.* She does not feel she is moving backwards; *'my parents were from the countryside. They were farmers. I studied to have a different life. Now I am back to being a farmer. For me it's like going forward, because I think we neglected the land.'*

Vasso Polychronopoulou, a freelance journalist from Athens shares time with a friend, a cameraman who bought some land in the north and is now growing lavender. *'Many families in the cities have small farms in their villages of origin, they are now going back to them in search of a better quality of life. These young people are bringing a high level of education and expertise with them. They bring new ways of doing things, one has even established a seed-saver project to gather and protect native Greek seeds for use in organic production'.*

Vassilis Ballas and his wife Roula Boura (Donadio 2012), respectively IT and marketing specialists, left Athens in 2006 to move to Chios, their home island, to cultivate mastic trees. They knew the trees could produce an anise-like resin used for mastic liquor, foodstuffs, candles and soap and had heard of the *'grandmother able to produce 100 kilos of mastic, going out on her own with a donkey',* a mastic for which you could earn 70 Euros a kilogram wholesale. But the couple found that mastic cultivation is more difficult than they imagined. Even though they now have 400 mastic trees, they have broadened into mastic-related ecotourism to make ends meet. This includes a wine cooperative, Ariousios, which is working to revive an ancient grape variety, Chiotiko krassero.

Petros Citouzouris (Cockburn 2011) prunes his vines high in the mountains of Naxos, the largest island in the Cyclades. '*Since the crisis began, unemployed builders, miners and pensioners are returning to family farms they inherited a generation ago, but never worked*' he says. The anxiety, dread and despair of the newcomers is felt everywhere in Naxos, contrasting to the island's extraordinary natural beauty, with its ancient ruins and white villages and the cascades of cultivated olive trees and vineyard terraces.

In some cases, the youth return to the sea. Since 2008, the number of applications to maritime schools across Greece has quadrupled to nearly 7,000, according to the Naval Ministry. Yannis Menis, 27 years old, had a promising career ahead of him as a nuclear physicist but, just before finishing his doctoral studies, he decided to follow in his father's footsteps as a ship engineer. *'My family was asking me if I studied all those years for nothing, I didn't tell anyone on board about my scientific past,'* he says. *'Everyone in Greece is at a disadvantage to be overqualified now.'*

People are looking for ways to reinvent themselves and they look for new training in different fields, but there are not enough places to go to. Katarina Sideri who runs vocational training courses in the mountain village of Chalki has 48 places in her training course and has received 200 applicants, many of them highly qualified. Similarly, the applications to the American Farm School near Thessaloniki went up three-fold in 2011 (Stolarz 2012). Panos Kanellis, the school's director, attributes this sudden increase in demand to the economic crisis. Thanos Bizbiroulas, a student in precision agriculture admits: *'To be honest, it was not my first choice, but in the current situation it seems to be the right choice. We thought we would work in an office but we are now going back to farming'*.

Tassos Haniotis (O'Brien 2015), Director of Economic Analysis, Perspectives and Evaluations at EU-DG Agriculture, in Brussels, believes that farming will play a significant role in the

Greek recovery. *'Young educated farmers will bring different things with them that will give added value to farming.'*

Recognizing the potential of the land to alleviate the crisis, national institutions have also played a part in encouraging the exodus back to the land. In 2012, in an address to the nation, the Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church, Archbishop Leronymos said: 'We want you to know that whoever is willing to work Greek land, has what is left of the church's land at their disposal' (Nissirio 2012). The Orthodox Church owns about 40 percent of the country's land. The Greek government also initiated a program, with almost 10,000 plots of public land assigned to young farmers at 5 euros per acre (0.4 ha) per season, with a maximum of 100 acres per person.

Thus, the steady shift to home farms and villages appears to be an unstoppable force fueled by desperation in the cities, inspired by hope for a better life. Some will flourish, others may fail. But all have taken a bold decision not to wait for the government. Their futures are now in their own hands. Beyond the numbers, the impulse to return to Greece's rural roots represents a telling new tendency since the onset of the crisis, *'a turning inward, a quiet kind of national pride in response to the overall gloom'.*

Dimitris Kaloupis, who left his job as a construction worker 20 years earlier during the boom years and now is a full-time farmer in Volissos, raises his own animals and vegetables and runs a local tavern. He thought Greece could handle this crisis, as it had many others. *'We invented civilization, and we'll take it back,'* Mr. Kaloupis says over a lunch of stewed lamb that he raised himself. If the Greek economy really plummets beyond repair, *'I will take the rock in my hand and squeeze it, and from the water that comes out of it, I'll make pilaf to feed my daughter. We'll manage.'* (Donadio 2012).

Portugal, Peasant Farming and the Countryside, a New Promise

The story of Portugal is a contrasting one. The government, realizing the potential of this back-to-the-land migration has put in place the mechanisms and policies to facilitate and encourage this move. In 2012, Jose Diogo Albuquerque, the country's Secretary of State for Agriculture, notes *'an economic reversal, a return to the basics, this back-to-the-land movement is being triggered by young entrepreneurs with high-school and university degrees and unemployed workers looking for a way out'* (Almeida 2013). The number of farming jobs rose 10.6 percent in the second quarter of 2012, the biggest increase out of all sectors of the economy according to Statistics Portugal.

Albuquerque announced that the government would allow farmers to grow crops on unused land, and would provide incentives to landowners. *'The aim is to eliminate the country's 2.7 billion Euro food-trade deficit by 2020'* he said. In February 2012, the government launched the initiative to map the country's unused land, with the aim of making it available for rent to those who wanted to work it. A land exchange scheme through which private owners of unused land got tax rebates if they rented their land out was launched and some 1.5 million hectares were made available in this way. *'In tough times, this is a way for people to generate some income, both those who put the land out for rental and those who exploit it,'* said Agriculture Minister Assunção Cristas. During the

second quarter of 2013, Portugal's economy expanded 1.1 percent, the first increase since 2010, as export growth accelerated (National Statistics Institute).

The movement continued to be fueled by a growing number of entrepreneurs turning to farming to make a living after almost three years of recession and record unemployment. One such farmer, interviewed in 2012 said: *'I lived in Lisbon and decided to go back home to the interior to grab the opportunity of exploring the land my father owned,'* (RTE´ 2012).

For those who are not looking for a total change in lifestyle, Lisbon's Council is finalizing plans for what is to become one of Europe's largest urban vegetable gardens: six hectares of land plots in Chelas, amongst the poorest areas on the outskirts of the capital. Lisbon Council member, Jose Sa Fernandes, leading the project, says the plots help heal citizens' souls as well as helping them financially.

'Instead of buying stuff, I have here what I need,' says Mr João Fernandes, 72 years old, a former cook in Quinta da Granja. For an annual fee between 50 and 80 Euros, plus the cost of seeds, tools and fertilizers, one can rent 150 square meters of land, wood-fenced all around. Wood shed and water supply are included. *'I plant beans, tomatoes, peas, potatoes and cabbage. It is all for personal consumption, for myself, my wife and my two sons,'* he says and I can easily save up to 150 Euros. In a country where the minimum wage is 485 Euros and the minimum retirement pension is 254 Euros, cultivating a vegetable patch becomes vital.

It is not only life on the farm that enjoys resurgence. In Tras-os-Montes one of Portugal's poorest regions, a group of former city dwellers led by Frederico Lucas, has launched the New Settlers, a consultancy company that attracts people from the cities who want to set up businesses in the region. EDP, the utilities company responsible for territorial development, pays 3,600 Euros per family resettled. Mr Lucas cannot keep up with the demand; Over 1,000 families have applied and 32 have already moved in. Among those who have resettled is Patricia Guimaraes, who moved with her husband to set up a company for small producers to sell honey online: *'here we are close to the growers and we have fresh produce all year around',* she says.

Luis, who works for Deloitte as IT specialist states that moving to the countryside has worked well for everyone. *'The cities of Lisbon and Porto are worn out and although people often think of moving abroad, perhaps we have alternatives at home'.* In the last decade, Lisbon and Porto lost 3 and 10 percent respectively of their population to the countryside.

These encouraging trends have helped the economy of the country. Food exports increased 17 percent in the last quarter of 2011, reaching 1.2 billion Euros and have become the country's second fastest-growing export. According to its Ministry of Agriculture, Portugal is the world's largest cork producer and the seventh largest wine exporter. It is also the fourth largest processed tomato exporter, and produces 2 percent of the world's olive oil.

Since 2015, the new government has been opening up new public services especially in the rural and remote areas, increasing the basic salary, as well as the payments to family farmers (increased to 600 euros per year), and undertaking structural reforms, thus

increasing the purchasing power of consumers. These positive signs should strengthen the position of the newcomers in the family farming sector.

The Power of Social Movements and the New Alternatives

In Spain, an increasing number of people have also been searching for new ways to escape indebtedness and impact of the crisis. This has been characterized by a return to the land, a migration to the rural areas, illustrated by the 'neorurales' movement (the newcomers to rural life), characterized by dynamic social movements and youth. Land under agroecological production is growing and in regions such as Ciudad Real, Córdoba, Granada or Huelva, it now exceeds 100,000 hectares (El Periódico Mediterráneo 2016). A range of new marketing options is emerging, with niche markets, short food supply chains, and innovation in the relationships with consumers. Examples of social mobilization (Abad 2013) that accompanied the return to the land with the objective of making farming more appealing, especially to the youth include: Responsible Agriculture Network (ARCo 2016), a national network for direct sales; Valencia Food Platform (SAPV 2017), generating a broad mobilization of citizens both producers, and consumers; The New Food Chain Policy (Álvarez 2016) in Valencia, negotiating with the local government food regulations in relation to short marketing channels and local markets; the Spanish Rural Platform (Plataforma Rural 2014), an alliance for a living rural environment, one of the most representative movements in Spain, active into reversing the decline of rural areas; the Spanish Peasant School (LVC 2015), a training initiative dedicated to young farmers; and the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) (Vorasenda 2015), a quality certification based on the active participation of stakeholders, based on trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.

In addition, a trend to use complementary currencies is developing. Two illustrative examples of financial innovation (social currencies and solidarity economy) linked to agroecology are chosen here: the case of Turuta (2012), inspired by the Transition Towns movement, which has developed an approach to increase resilience and the reuse of abandoned lands, and restoration of soil fertility in Catalonia. The second example is the development of consumption groups and Community Supported Agriculture in Asturias, which created RASTRU (2012), the Asturian network of barter communities, with a mutual credit system in which currency is created when exchanging goods or services.

The return to the land is being facilitated locally by the village town halls, many of which have created land banks (bancos de tierra). These local administrations have made available unused land to those willing to farm and act as intermediaries to establish the leasing prices of private land. They have also in many cases activated peasant markets and the purchasing of local produce for school meals. The importance and scale of this transformation comes from a large, well-organized civil society movement, with territorial networks -redes territoriales, and a growing awareness of the consumer, resulting in significant increase of the consumption of agroecological produce. The Spanish Ministry of Labour has consequently noted a growing trend of employment in the agroecological sector. A peculiar example of solution found to fight the debt crisis is the case of Rasquera (DW 2012), a small village south of Barcelona, which found a way to reduce its 1.3 million euro debt and contribute to reducing unemployment, by renting a seven hectares' field to grow cannabis. In a local referendum, 56 percent of voters backed the plan to rent the land to the ABCDA

Marijuana Smokers' Association to grow cannabis for what would be legal therapeutic and recreational purposes (under Spanish law private consumption of cannabis is allowed). Rasquera's Economic Counselor, Jose María Insausti stated: 'We are being asked to pay off our debts impossibly quickly, ABCDA will pay the village 650,000 euros per year for the right to grow its annual supply here'.

In the case of Iceland, the return is a return to the sea. Fishing sustained Iceland for centuries. Some years ago, Icelanders discovered that vast fortunes could be made in the world of finance. What followed was a ride on the money-making carousel: Icelandic banks borrowed, made loans, and borrowed some more. The banks' assets skyrocketed before the inevitable collapse. In late 2008, over the space of a few days the economy came apart following the default of the country's three main private banks. What followed was a massive reaction by Iceland's citizens aimed at refloating their economy.

In Thingeyri, Kristjan Davidsson (Forelle 2008) tells his story: He went to the sea as a deckhand at 16 years old. When he was at fisheries college he wanted to be a boat captain. For two decades, he sold fish and fish-processing equipment. Like his father, and practically everyone in this remote village, he owed his living to the fish from the ocean. But in 2001 Mr. Davidsson wanted a change. He joined one of Iceland's newly privatized banks and soon became rich. Now, he says, it looks like it's back to fishing. That may be true for the nation as a whole. 'Those especially who have been raised in small villages close to the sea, they still have it in their blood,' he says, 'I think it is just a question of moving back.' Both the land and the sea, act as a refuge. People return to the source, the origin, the place they come from, perhaps not directly in their lifetime, but as a part of an intergenerational flow. And even for those who have no connection beyond cities, the sea and the countryside appear as a promise for the possibility of a livelihood.

The following sections share some reflections on the training and knowledge transfer available to the newcomers, and raise some lines of thought about the interface between the urban and the rural, and the flows between the two.

When the Subjective Forms of Knowledge Become Crucial

The example of Portugal shows that proactive policies can make a significant difference to the dynamic flows between national territories, with new opportunities for livelihoods that translate into positive country indicators. The back and forth movements from town to village and vice versa can be facilitated and encouraged. This lesson may apply to other countries as well.

Rami Zurayk, writing in the Lebanese journal, Al Akhbar in May 2012 (Zurayk 2012), said:

"Greece has been witnessing an exodus of young people to the countryside. With their university education they have improved traditional skills to contributing to the local economy (…). The Portuguese government is encouraging this move by lowering taxes for land owners who put their land at the disposal of these new farmers. This change has led to food exports rising by 17% since the beginning of the crisis. All this is happening at a time when the Arab countries, with Lebanon at the forefront, are suffering from deepening crises.

Their governments are uncertain about their economic options. So what are we waiting for to support a return to the land, encouraging our young people to root themselves in their own country?"

In addition to proposing new types of policy support, another element to facilitate these transitions is the access to training. In some of the examples from Greece, people do not know where to access training and therefore are left with even fewer choices. This is an area where there is still much to implement. There is ample space to learn from, and develop further the subjective and experiential forms of knowledge that already exist in peasant agriculture and that are promoted in permaculture and agroecology.

In the past, western knowledge systems have essentially conveyed a Cartesian linear approach (cause-effect). This has contributed to a rational or scientific approach to learning and cognitive development which ignores other forms of knowledge and understanding. These other forms represent more subjective forms of knowledge and correspond to a process acquired through practice (experiential learning). As expressed by Cato and Myers (2011), the 'how' we know, is as important as the 'what' we know, which opens up the question of how people know each other and the world they share.

Thus, for these newcomers and peasants-to-be, the traditional form of teaching agriculture is not the only alternative and could be complemented by other forms of knowledge. Much of the approach in agriculture in recent decades has been that one of putting the producer in a spectators' position, telling him or her what to do and providing ready-made packages with instructions for use.

But when people return to the land, we often hear of the importance to reconnect with family, friends and with those living in the place as a first step. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty (2002) says perceptions form the basis for relationships. Then, and only then, does knowledge gradually advance, as people start rooting themselves in the place through a process that Deleuze and Parnet (1987) calls 'a passionate commitment in relation to the physical world'. The re-appropriation of knowledge then becomes an act of active participation, whereby newcomers evolve into the actors who become responsible for the design of their own environment as active players of transformation towards more adaptive systems.

The Opiate Receptors at the Interface Between the Urban and the Rural

In their planning institutions, societies have tended to separate the urban and the rural. The literature is vast, promoting one or the other, with fundamental works such as Wirth (1938) talking about urbanism as a way of life. But is there such a large gap between the two? Do we need to oppose them or idealize one or the other? We believe that we have artificially increased the distance between them by having separate public institutions that develop and implement distinct policies, exacerbating the separation between distinct territories. But on both sides there are humans who have similar aspirations and needs.

Rather than talking about the urban or the rural, we would like to open a new reflection by proposing to focus on the intersection, the chasm, between the two. We could visualize this

blurred area as a membrane that concomitantly separates and unifies them whilst at the same time complementing and amplifying them both. Pert (1999) who discovered the opiate receptors in the brain, the cellular bindings for endorphins, found out that membranes, which have unique keys and hold innumerable number of locks are in constant transformation.

We like to imagine the connection between the urban and the rural as this extraordinary diversity of connections and relationships for which we still can invent a multitude of new keys, new ways of interaction and exchange. Rather than working separately on 'developing the countryside', or 'developing the towns of tomorrow' we can look at the intersection between the urban and the rural as holding the keys to infinite new fields of opportunities and synergies. Places of passage between the two are still to be invented and activated through common platforms of interaction and creativity.

We can open new spaces for reflection on nature-based solutions for the cities, and urban dynamics for the rural. The recognition of bountifulness as opposed to the artificially constructed idea of shortage, scarcity and limitation of resources analyzed in the works of Latouche (2005) who talks about the related fear and paralysis it engenders is important. Portugal, in this respect, gives us a good illustration of what is possible when this fear is cast aside.

Thus, the movements between the urban and the rural, art, culture, foods, nature and many more expand. Like an '8' shape with the rural and the urban on each side, and the intersection in-between, people move between the two, as renewed forms of life develop. If we acknowledge the permeability between the urban and the rural, if we reunify policy decision bodies and bring the people back into decision-making processes, we can recover a greater understanding of the resemblance rather than the difference between the two, and reactivate their mutually enriching faculties.

Conclusion

We are witnessing that when the situation worsens for people in towns, the countryside emerges as a refuge—a place filled with the promise of a livelihood, with peasant farming, or fishing—that holds the keys to the idea of a possible future. It is interesting and even astonishing to realize that when things go wrong elsewhere and all indicators are flashing red (or even black) the agricultural sector goes green and shows growth, away from the recession, distinct from the overall gloomy picture. Sometimes people return to the land, or the sea, because they have no other choice, but when public institutions support this move and take proactive action, knowledge transfer is facilitated, and this trend creates an appel d'air—an attractive or aspirational force that invites others to follow. This move leads to businesses, even those not in the farming sector, to become attracted to what, until yesterday, was considered a remote and inhospitable territory.

It is in the bridge between the urban and the rural that lie the keys to more dynamic and bountiful local economies. For the newcomers, the countryside offers both a promise and a challenge. They bring with them new ideas on farming and nature-connected occupations. Transformative movements take place. As such peasant farming, provides the keys to an

infinite array of new opportunities to a youth, able to reinvent the flows between different geographies and landscapes of the future.

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